

## Health and Community Care Research

# Evaluation of the Breathing Space telephone advice line and signposting service for people experiencing low mood or depression

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Breathing Space is a free, confidential telephone advice line and signposting service for those experiencing low mood and depression. It is primarily aimed at young men between the ages of 16 and 40 years, but is open to all. Breathing Space was introduced as a pilot scheme in 2002 in Greater Glasgow and Argyll & Clyde, and was extended to serve the whole country in 2004. Funded by the Scottish Executive, it is part of the Scottish Executive's National Programme for Improving Mental Health and Well-being. The work reported in these research findings was commissioned by the Scottish Executive to assess the development of the service and to evaluate its effectiveness to date.

## Main Findings

- National survey information indicates that, at the time Breathing Space was set up in 2002, approximately 159,000 men in the target age group in Scotland showed signs of mental distress.
- The number of calls to Breathing Space has shown an overall upward trend since December 2003. Since June 2005, over 2000 calls have been answered by the line each month.
- There has been an overall downward trend in the proportion of calls from the target group (males aged 16-40 years) since early 2004 when NHS 24 took over management of the line and since the service was rolled out nationally.
- A survey of the general public in summer 2005 indicated low levels of awareness of Breathing Space (9%). Awareness was higher amongst younger age groups and in the two pilot areas, Argyll & Clyde and Greater Glasgow, where the service had been promoted longest.
- Most people who participated in focus groups carried out as part of the evaluation felt the marketing materials were aimed at men and younger age groups. However, they reported that the materials did not give a clear picture of what the service offered.
- The majority of service providers, sampled from the Breathing Space database of organisations to which callers to the service could be signposted, were aware of the service. Few were aware of clients being signposted to them, and many felt the service needed more advertising and publicity. Not all contact details for service providers were up to date.
- People who had used Breathing Space found the advisers helpful and knowledgeable, and particularly appreciated being able to talk to someone when other services were not available.

## The Breathing Space service

Breathing Space is a free, confidential telephone advice line and signposting service for those experiencing low mood and depression. It is primarily aimed at young men between the ages of 16 and 40 years, but is open to all. Breathing Space was introduced as a pilot scheme in 2002 in Greater Glasgow and Argyll & Clyde, and was extended to serve the whole country in 2004. Funded by the Scottish Executive, it is part of the Scottish Executive's National Programme for Improving Mental Health and Well-being.

The Breathing Space service was initially provided by the Essentia Group, with the Executive being responsible for its promotion. In February 2004 it transferred, along with all publicity for the service, to NHS 24.

Breathing Space provides a service 7 days a week from 6pm until 2am. Its phonline advisers have access to a database of over 4000 organisations, to which callers can be signposted.

Advertising for Breathing Space is aimed at its primary target group. The main focus has been on radio, newspaper and magazine advertising, accompanied by a range of ambient media such as posters, beer mats etc.

## Aims of evaluation

The aims of the evaluation were: to assess the development of the Breathing Space service in terms of input, process and outputs; to evaluate the effectiveness of the service in terms of reach, results and impacts to date; and to make recommendations for the future development of the service.

## Methods

A range of quantitative and qualitative methods were used to conduct the evaluation:

- Interviews with stakeholders (n=7)
- Documentary analysis of Breathing Space reports etc and Scottish Executive files
- Secondary analysis of national surveys to estimate the size of the potential target group
- Analysis of Breathing Space monitoring data
- A survey to determine awareness of Breathing Space amongst the general public
- Focus groups to explore awareness and understanding of Breathing Space and its campaign materials amongst the public

- A telephone survey of a sample of service providers to which callers to Breathing Space had been signposted
- Interviews with users of Breathing Space to find out about their experience of calling the service

## Estimating the target group

Extrapolation from the Health Education Population Survey (HEPS)<sup>1</sup> suggests that, in Scotland, approximately 159,000 men in the age group 16 to 44 (out of just under 1 million) have signs of mental distress as indicated by the GHQ12, and are therefore potential users of Breathing Space.

## Uptake, reach and effectiveness

Breathing Space attempts to collect data on age, gender, reason for calling and outcome of call, for each call answered by the service. However, due to the confidential nature of the service, it is not always possible to collect all items of data for each call. Findings in this section therefore have to be treated with caution.

There has been an overall upward trend in the volume of calls to Breathing Space since December 2003, although the number of calls fluctuates from month to month. In the first month of operation under NHS 24, 930 calls were answered; this increased to 1500 calls for each of the next two months. From June to October 2005, over 2000 calls were made to the line each month.

Male callers outnumbered females in most months when the Essentia Group provided the service. Since the service was transferred to NHS 24 in February 2004, the number of calls from females has overtaken those from males, and there has been an overall downward trend in the proportion of calls from the target group.

Data on other characteristics of callers are limited, but indicate that most callers receive 'support' (through active listening). A small proportion of callers are signposted to other services.

## Awareness and Perception of Breathing Space

To test awareness of Breathing Space amongst the general public, a module of questions in one of MRUK's regular monthly surveys was commissioned. In July 2005, a sample of 1240 adults (including a boost of 100 people in each of

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<sup>1</sup> Malam S, Angle H, Wimbush E, Fraser E (2004). Health Education Population Survey 1996-2003. Health Scotland, Edinburgh.

the two pilot areas) from across Scotland were asked whether they knew about Breathing Space.

About 9% of the general public were aware of Breathing Space. Awareness was higher in the areas where Breathing Space has been promoted longest: 18% in Argyll & Bute, 17% in Glasgow.<sup>2</sup>

Most of those who had heard of Breathing Space had heard about it on the radio (63%). More respondents (22%) recalled hearing the radio advert than said they had heard of Breathing Space (9%), suggesting that the advert may be getting people's attention but not getting across the name of the service or its function.

### **Focus Groups**

Eight focus groups were conducted to allow an exploration of the understanding and perceptions of the campaign messages and the service offered. Three groups were conducted with the general public, mixed by age, gender and socioeconomic status. The remaining five groups were with groups identified as being at higher risk of mental distress and self harm. These included gay men, young offenders, people with experience of mental health problems and two groups of young men from socially deprived circumstances. Participants were asked for their views on a range of Breathing Space materials, including a radio advert and a postcard. They were also asked about potential use, and barriers to potential use, of the service.

A minority of participants said, unprompted, that they had heard of Breathing Space. Those who were aware of Breathing Space were more likely to have heard about it on the radio.

Most participants did not have a clear understanding of the service Breathing Space offered from the marketing materials they had seen or heard, and there was confusion over what to expect if they called.

The majority of participants felt the marketing materials they were shown were aimed at men.

### **Service providers**

A sample of 100 organisations to which callers had been signposted was interviewed by telephone. They were asked about awareness of Breathing Space, their understanding of its role and remit and any contact they had with the service.

The sample comprised the 20 organisations that had received the most signpostings, and 80 randomly selected from the remaining organisations, from a list of about 400 to which callers had been signposted since February 2004. Contact details for a small number of organisations were found to be out of date.

The majority of service providers had heard of Breathing Space, but fewer knew what it did. They had heard of Breathing Space via leaflets/posters, direct communication and the radio. Few had had any contact with Breathing Space, and fewer still were aware of any clients being directed to them from Breathing Space. Service providers felt there was a definite need for the service, but that it needed more advertising and publicity to become better known.

## **Users' views of Breathing Space**

Fifteen interviews were conducted with users of the service. Interviewees responded to invitations to take part in the research placed on the Breathing Space web site, via advertising in service providers' premises or newsletters. Advisers on the line also gave callers contact details for the evaluation.

Most users reported that they rang Breathing Space looking for someone to talk to about how they were feeling and/or for someone to listen to them. Users felt that advisers were empathetic, were good listeners and had good knowledge of the illness and/or problems users were calling about.

## **Recommendations**

1. There is consensus on the need for a service like Breathing Space, and the way the service has been developed to date is meeting the needs of callers. The service should continue, and a pro-active approach to service development should be maintained.
2. Breathing Space needs to focus on improving awareness of the service, and on giving information about what callers can expect when contacting the service. Radio advertising should continue, as well as personal communication via health workers, and additional routes for promoting the service should also be pursued.
3. Although Breathing Space has had some success to date in reaching the primary target group (men between the ages of 16 and 40), it needs to explore, and assess the effectiveness of, additional ways of reaching this group. More effective use should be made of current monitoring data to assist in the development of marketing to attract the primary target group.

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<sup>2</sup> MRUK survey samples by constituency, and Argyll & Bute was the closest approximation to the pilot area Argyll & Clyde.

4. Breathing Space needs to explore ways in which the database of organisations to which callers can be signposted can be kept up to date, and ways of ensuring that these organisations have reliable information about the Breathing Space service. This is particularly important for those organisations which receive the greatest number of signpostings. Breathing Space might consider working with organisations on the database to develop mechanisms for tracking referral data, as part of ongoing monitoring of the service.
5. The module commissioned in the survey of the general public in July 2005 should be repeated in 2007, to track changes in the general public's awareness of, and response to, the service and campaign materials.

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